

Chapter 9

The Generous Qur'an Ten Selected Suras

Michael Sells

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Extracted from [Approaching the Qur'an](#) by Quaker Universalist Fellowship

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

1 In this pamphlet we offer to Friends ten short chapters, or "suras," from the Qur'an, translated with accompanying
2 commentary by Michael Sells. The selections are from 36 suras included in Sells' book, *Approaching The Qur'an:
3 The Early Revelations*, published by White Cloud Press (Ashland, Oregon, 1999). We hope that readers who are
4 touched by the beauty of the verses and intrigued by the explanations will go on to read further in the book itself
5 — and not only to read, but to listen, for the book as published is accompanied by a compact disk (CD) on which
6 six of the shorter suras are recited in Arabic. As one listens, one may follow them in the text, which gives a full
7 transliteration and a word-for-word English gloss.

8 As Sells explains in his introduction to the book, the Qur'an is for speakers of Arabic primarily an auditory
9 experience. Its poetry and its power, often resting in associations of sound as well as meaning, are almost
10 incapable of translation. For this reason among others, the Qur'an has been little understood or appreciated in the
11 West. It tends to remain an enigma, even for seekers like universalist Friends, who are generally open to the
12 spiritual truths of other religions and cultures.

13 In this rendering, which has been honed by years of use in the classroom, Sells seeks to bring readers an
14 appreciation for the subtle feeling and spiritual resonance of these brief "Early Revelations" given to the prophet
15 Mohammed. They are, as he points out, only a small part of the Qur'an, but, perhaps, the part most often taught
16 and committed to memory by followers of Islam. The words are regarded by those followers as a direct
17 transmission from God via the Prophet.

18 From time to time QUF publications have carried discussions of traditions other than Christianity, but Islam has
19 been neglected. Historically this seems strange, for Islam, along with Judaism and the varied beliefs of American
20 Indians, was one of the first non-Christian bodies of thought that 17th-century Friends encountered. Early Friends,
21 including George Fox, approached Islam without hostility and with a conviction that its followers were potentially
22 open to the inward light. Yet they made little effort to study or understand the truths that might be found in the
23 Qur'an.

24 Several years ago at an FGC gathering the absence of material on Islam was brought to the attention of members
25 of the QUF steering committee along with a request that we try to fill the gap. Now, thanks to Michael Sells, we
26 are able to take a step in that direction. When we asked what led him to Quakerism and Islamic studies, he replied
27 as follows, writing in the third person:

1 Michael Sells encountered Quaker meeting for worship for the first time while he was a graduate student at the
2 University of Chicago. His roommate suggested he attend the 57th Street Meeting. He was immediately struck by
3 the diversity of voices in the meeting. Compelling messages from a variety of religious and nonreligious
4 perspectives sounded and were heard in the depth of the surrounding silence. He remembers hearing messages
5 bristling with Old Testament prophecy, Christian-centered reflections, psychological self-reflections, personal
6 concerns expressed in a manner more open than he had heard in public, Buddhist-centered messages, and
7 messages of political engagement. He recalls that this was the first time he had encountered such a diversity of
8 perspectives not only being accepted, but actually being embraced within a religious context. He ultimately found
9 in the Quaker Universalist Fellowship a larger framework for the cultivation of such a diversity.

10 At the time he was encountering Quakerism for the first time, Michael Sells was working to finish his graduate
11 studies toward a Ph.D. in comparative literature. During the next two years he completed a dissertation on
12 comparative mystical language in Greek, Islamic, and Christian mysticism. At the same time his interest in Arabic
13 and the Islamic world was growing. He has since made Arabic and the Islamic civilization a central part of his
14 research.

15 Of all traditions, Islam is the one that encounters the fiercest prejudice in the United States at this time. Recently
16 Sells returned from a three-week stay in Damascus. He recalls the deep hospitality, respect, and warmth with
17 which he was accepted by people from every stratum of society. After returning home, he began seeing again the
18 image of the Arab and the Muslim on the news media and in newspapers. At times he found himself wondering if
19 the image seen in the U.S. had anything to do with the culture and life in a city like Damascus. Having lived for
20 five years in North Africa and the Middle East, he had developed the conviction that Muslims have the exact
21 same proportion of peaceful and violent personalities, successful and failed marriages, tenderness or neglect of
22 parents toward children or children toward parents, and honest or deceitful discourses as do communities in the
23 United States.

24 After 16 years of teaching the religions of the world at Haverford College, Michael Sells is more convinced than
25 ever of the infinite depth of wisdom within each religious tradition, from Islam to Hinduism, from the Igbo of
26 Nigeria to the Ojibwe of Minnesota. He has also encountered and written about the way religious symbols can be
27 manipulated to motivate and justify horrendous violence, as was the case in Bosnia. Because the Muslims have
28 been dehumanized through stereotyping in Western media, Sells has focused his teaching, research, and writing
29 on those aspects of Islamic culture that are "lost in translation." The rich worlds of nuance, humor, gentleness,
30 wit, dissent, meditation, and love poetry, all of which are central to Middle Eastern and other Islamic societies, are
31 commonly stripped from the image of Islam as it is presented, sometimes by outsiders, sometimes by those
32 claiming to be its leaders in the West. The result of such loss is a mono-dimensional and wooden image of the
33 people and the culture. In *Approaching the Qur'an*, Michael Sells attempts to bring across the combination of
34 intimacy and majesty that is central to the Qur'an and which tends to be lost in many translations.

35 We are grateful to Michael Sells for these comments as well as for his generous permission in letting us reprint
36 selections from his book.

37 *Rhoda R. Gilman*

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6 Three calligraphy styles presenting the phrase *bi smi Allah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim* (In the name of God
7 the Compassionate the Caring), which precedes each sura of the Qur'an.

8

9 1

10 THE OPENING

11

In the name of God
the Compassionate the Caring
Praise be to God
lord sustainer of the worlds
the Compassionate the Caring
master of the day of reckoning
5 To you we turn to worship
and to you we turn in time of need
Guide us along the road straight
the road of those to whom you are giving
not those with anger upon them
not those who have lost the way

1 Because of its eloquent statement of devotion and the manner in which it pervades religious life, *The Opening* has
2 been called the Islamic equivalent of the Lord's Prayer in Christianity. The word translated "opening," *fātiha*,
3 means the opening in the sense of the opening of a chapter or a story. Unlike the other early hymic Suras, *The*
4 *Opening* occurs not at the end of the Qur'anic written text, but at the very beginning. It is the most recited of all
5 Qur'anic Suras, not only in prayers and liturgy, but also in everyday life. After business transactions, for example,
6 *The Opening* is recited by both parties as a mark of good faith and a solemn affirmation of the responsibilities
7 affirmed by each partner.

8 *The Opening* is the only Sura in which the phrase "In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring" does not
9 occur before the Sura, but is actually considered part of the Sura itself. Just as that phrase is woven into the
10 pattern of simple activities as a form of reminder so "Praise be to God" (*al-hamdu li llāh*) has become part of
11 everyday speech. It is used after any good news or any praise, and as a response to the greeting "How are you?"

12 The two qualifications of God are "lord of the worlds" (the creator deity) and "master of the day of reckoning"
13 (the deity who brings finality to all acts and all lives). The response for those hearing or reciting *The Opening* is to
14 turn toward God in worship and for refuge.

15 The "the road straight" frequently is translated as "the straight path." The term rendered here as road, *sirāt*, would
16 have connoted something grand to the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula. There are many words in Arabic for
17 paths; the Arabs of Muhammad's time traveled through the desert on barely discernible paths. By contrast, the
18 word *sirāt* means a paved road, such as the roads of the Romans which the Arabian travelers might come across in
19 their journeys.

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22

53: 118 THE STAR

23

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

By the star as it falls
Your companion has not lost his way nor is he deluded
He does not speak out of desire
This is a revelation

5 taught him by one of great power
and strength that stretched out over
while on the highest horizon —
then drew near and came down
two bows' lengths or nearer
10 He revealed to his servant what he revealed
The heart did not lie in what it saw
Will you then dispute with him his vision?
He saw it descending another time
at the lote tree of the furthest limit
15 There was the garden of sanctuary

when something came down over the lote tree, enfolding
His gaze did not turn aside nor go too far
He had seen the signs of his lord, great signs

1

2 The first eighteen verses of The Star are considered among the earliest revelations of the Qur'an and are the most
3 explicit reference to Muhammad's prophetic vision. The Sura begins (1-12) with the divine voice swearing by the
4 falling star that "your companion" has not gone mad or lost his way. "Your companion" is interpreted as
5 Muhammad. His vision is also called a revelation (*wahy*) and is explicitly said to be rooted not in desire (*hawā*),
6 which the Qur'an associates with the inspiration of the poets (Sura 26). The object of vision is never actually
7 described. Instead, the text evokes the process of vision by tracing a movement along the highest horizon and then
8 a descent and drawing near to the distance of "two bows' lengths." The passage ends with an affirmation of the
9 validity of the vision: The heart of the prophet "did not lie in what he saw." This affirmation becomes a proof text
10 for the claim among many mystics and philosophers that the locus of spiritual vision and mystical knowledge is
11 the heart.

12 In a second passage (13-18), the divine voice, referring to Muhammad again in the third person, describes another
13 vision ("He saw it descending another time"). Here, "the lote tree of the furthest limit" is placed in or near the
14 enigmatic "garden of sanctuary." We are told almost nothing about the tree, except that something came upon it in
15 an enveloping manner. Of key importance is the "gaze" of the prophet, which does not "turn aside" or "go too
16 far." This one verse became the paradigm for Islamic reflection on the proper state in contemplation. As in many
17 evocative passages in the Qur'an, what is left unsaid is as important as what is said. Here, the power of the vision
18 is evoked through a depiction of the gaze of the viewer, but the vision itself is never described in detail or given
19 fixed form in a way that limits thought or imagination.

20 When the Qur'an states "He saw it descending another time," the antecedent of the pronoun (*hu*, it/him) is
21 unstated, and thus the referent of the "it" is not determinable from the passage. The identity of the referent became
22 a matter of controversy, with the debate centering upon whether or not the deity can be seen in this world. Those
23 for whom the vision of God can only occur in the afterlife tend to interpret the it/he as referring to the messenger-
24 angel Gabriel.



The bismillah invocation in the form of an ostrich

87

THE MOST HIGH

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

Holy be the name of your lord most high
 Who created then gave form
 Who determined then gave guidance
 Who made the meadow pasture grow
 5 then turned it to a darkened flood-swept remnant
 We will make you recite. You will not forget
 except what the will of God allows
 He knows what is declared
 and what lies hidden
 He will ease you to the life of ease
 So remind them if reminder will succeed
 10 Those who know awe will be brought to remember
 He who is hard in wrong will turn away

He will be put to the fire
 neither dying in it nor living
 He who makes himself pure will flourish
 15 who remembers the name of his lord and
 performs the prayer
 But no. They prefer the lower life
 Better is the life ultimate, the life that endures
 As is set down in the scrolls of the ancients
 the scrolls of Ibrahīm and Músa

1
 2 *The Most High* centers on a repeated theme of the early Meccan Suras: the Qur'anic text and its messenger as a
 3 "reminder." The divine voice proclaims that Muhammad can only remind but not compel his listeners to heed the
 4 reminder. God is depicted here as the one who knows what is in the open and what is hidden. This notion of the
 5 deity will be developed throughout the Qur'an by the use of divine names such as the all-seeing (*al-basīr*), the all-
 6 hearing (*as-samī`*), the one who knows inside and out (*al-khabīr*), and the all-knowing (*al-`alīm*). The human
 7 being hides things from others and from himself. The being that knows these hidden, most intimate details, that
 8 knows ourselves better than we know ourselves, is the Qur'anic God, Allah.

9 Those who cannot be brought to remember their essential role and responsibility as human beings are said to
 10 prefer the lower life (*al-hayāt ad-dunyā*). The word for "lower" here is also the word, when used as a noun, for
 11 "world," a meaning that has led some translators to render the phrase "the life of the world." Although there may
 12 be a play on the two senses of *dunyā* here, grammatically the term cannot mean "life of the world" and I have
 13 adhered to the more immediate meaning of the term. The other problem with terms like "life of the world" or
 14 "worldly" is that the Qur'an generally does not view the world in negative terms, seeing it instead as the gift of an
 15 infinitely generous creator that, however transitory it may be, is to be cherished rather than despised.

16 The final verse suggests that the central message of *The Most High* is the same one that was revealed to Abraham
 17 (Ibrāhīm) and Moses (Mūsā).

90 THE GROUND

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

I swear by this ground
 — you have come to dwell on this ground —
 by the begetter and by the begotten,
 we created the human being in hardship
 5 Does he think there is no power over him
 He says: look at the goods I devoured
 Does he think no one sees him

Did we not endow him with eyes
 lips and tongue
 10 and guide him to the two high plains
 And yet he did not climb the steep pass
 What can tell you of the steep pass?
 To free a slave
 To feed the destitute on a day of hunger
 15 a kinsman orphan
 or a stranger out of luck in need
 Be of those who keep the faith
 who counsel one another to patience
 who counsel to compassion
 They are of the right
 As for those who cast our signs away
 they are of the left
 20 Over them a vault of fire

1 The oath at the beginning of *The Ground* evokes as a sign the ground, area, or region (presumably the district
 2 around Mecca, held as a sacred territory). In verse 2 it speaks directly to the prophet and indirectly to other
 3 Meccans, in stating, "you have come to dwell on this ground." The Arab term rendered here as ground, *balad*, can
 4 mean both town and countryside and there is a difference of opinion concerning the exact area designated by the
 5 term — whether it means the town of Mecca or the territory or land on which Mecca sits. I have chosen an
 6 English term, ground, that can be as open in usage as the original Arabic. After invoking as signs this special
 7 ground and the "the begetter and the begotten," the Sura turns to one of the fundamental messages of the early
 8 Meccan period: condemnation of indifference and callousness toward the orphaned and the poor.

9 The condemnation of indifference to the suffering of others is brought back to the sign of the land in a graphic
 10 manner. The emancipation of a slave or caring for the disinherited is portrayed as the climbing of a high pass, the
 11 steep, narrow, treacherous ledge that rises up along the face of desert mountains.

12 The Sura ends with a divine command to people to counsel one another to patience and compassion, and with a
 13 warning to those who deny the signs. The word for sign (*āya*) means both a physical sign (such as the land) and
 14 also a verse of the Qur'an. The verses of the Qur'an are both a remembrance of signs that are present throughout
 15 the world and themselves signs, which, like the signs of nature, point to a deeper reality forgotten or neglected in
 16 everyday human consciousness and endeavor.

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18

19

91 THE SUN

20

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

By the sun and her brightening
 By the moon when it follows her
 By the day when it displays her
 By the night when it veils her
 5 By the sky and what constructed her
 By the earth and what shaped her
 By the soul and what formed her
 and revealed her debased
 and revealed her faithful
 Whoever honors her flourishes
 10 Whoever defiles her fails
 The people of Thamud called truth a lie
 in their inhumanity
 when they sent out their worst
 The messenger of God said
 God's camel mare
 give her water!
 They called him liar
 and hamstrung her for the slaughter
 15 Then their lord rumbled down upon them
 for their crime and wiped them away
 with no fear of what came after

1
 2 The Sun begins with one of the most extended oaths of the Qur'an. The sun is portrayed surrounded by a court, in
 3 the most lyrical Qur'anic tone. The word for sun (*shams*) is grammatically feminine in Arabic and takes the
 4 grammatically feminine pronoun *hā*. By making *hā* the key rhyme word throughout the first part of the Sura, the
 5 Qur'anic voice creates a partial personification. In other words, a "gender figure" is produced. The "her" is never
 6 fully personified as a woman, but is always on the verge of such a personification.

7 The second part of the Sura evokes the civilization of Thamūd. For the people of Arabia, there were few symbols
 8 more potent than the tribe of Thamūd and the ruins of their great city that may have been part of the Nabataean
 9 culture whose capital was Petra, the "red rose city as old as time."

10 In both early Islamic poetry and the Qur'an, the destruction of Thamūd became a parable for the passing of
 11 civilizations. The poets attributed the passing of the civilization to the incessant work of fate/time (*dahr*), which
 12 wears down all things and thwarts human aspirations. The Qur'an attributed the destruction of Thamūd to the
 13 refusal of its people to heed the words of their prophet, a refusal that led to the destruction of other peoples before
 14 and after Thamūd as well.

15 In disobeying their prophet, Sālih, the people of Thamūd slaughtered God's camel mare. Nothing was more taboo
 16 in ancient Arabia than the unjustified killing of a camel mare. The central ritual of pre-Islamic poetry was the

1 camel sacrifice and distribution of the meat throughout the tribe. The improper slaying of a camel mare was a
2 sacrilege or abomination of such enormity that it led to tribal wars that lasted generations.

3 By slaughtering God's camel mare, the people of Thamūd committed what was by both ancient tribal standards
4 and Qur'anic standards an abomination. The depictions of the destruction of Thamūd are also eerily similar to
5 depictions of the events of the day of reckoning and may serve as a parable for them as well.

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93 THE MORNING HOURS

9

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

By the morning hours
By the night when it is still
Your lord has not abandoned you
and does not hate you

What is after will be better
than what came before

5 To you the lord will be giving
You will be content

Did he not find you orphaned
and give you shelter

Find you lost
and guide you

Find you in hunger
and provide for you

10 As for the orphan —
do not oppress him
And one who asks —
do not turn him away
And the grace of your lord —
proclaim

10

11 Muhammad was orphaned as a young boy and came under the protection of his grandfather. When his grandfather
12 died, his uncle became his guardian. In a tribal society based on family and clan protection, the loss of his father
13 and grandfather left Muhammad vulnerable to enemies in Mecca, particularly when he began reciting the Qur'anic
14 messages that threatened the interests and beliefs of more powerful men.

1 In this short Sura, the Qur'anic emphasis on helping the orphaned and the disinherited is directly tied into a
2 reminder (to Muhammad and to the listener in the more general sense) of the sufferings Muhammad experienced
3 in his youth. Many commentators believe that this Sura was a consolation to Muhammad for the opposition and
4 persecution he suffered as a prophet in the early Meccan years.

6 **103**
7 **THE EPOCH**

8 **In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring**

By the age, the epoch
The human is always at a loss
Except those who keep the faith
who work justice
who counsel one another to truth
and counsel one another to patience

9
10 *The Epoch* offers a condensed version of the ethos of the early Meccan revelations. There is no doctrine of
11 original sin in Islam, no doctrine of an innate sinfulness that makes every human inherently unworthy of salvation
12 without the saving grace of the deity. Instead, the Qur'an affirms that humankind is in a state of forgetfulness,
13 confusion, and loss, and in need of reminder.

14 This Sura affirms that each human being is at a loss, except those who engage in four activities. The first activity
15 is holding or keeping the faith (*imān*). This word is often translated as "belief," but *imān* includes not only
16 intellectual assent to certain propositions but also engagement in just actions. These actions include 1) defending
17 belief in the face of persecution or ridicule; 2) sharing wealth; 3) protecting those who are disinherited or in need;
18 and 4) performing the ritual prayer, *salāt* — the second activity explicitly mentioned in this Sura. The word *imān*
19 also has connotations of being secure or protected. In other words, to keep the faith through an active witness that
20 exposes one to persecution and danger, is, ironically, to gain refuge.

21 The last two items tie two primary virtues, the seeking of truth (*haqq*) and patience (*sabr*), to the social nature of
22 such activity, the mutual counseling and encouraging of friend to friend toward such ends.

24 **107**
25
26 **THE SMALL KINDNESS**

27 **In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring**

Do you see him who calls the reckoning a lie?

He is the one who casts the orphan away
who fails to urge the feeding of one in need
Cursed are those who perform the prayer
5 unmindfully
who make of themselves a big show
but hold back the small kindness

1 *The Small Kindness* relates a series of activities in a way that grounds much of Islamic moral theology. The first
2 act is rejecting or calling a lie the *din*, a word that can mean either the religion or the day of reckoning. Just as the
3 word often translated as "believe" is more passive than the Qur'anic conception of holding fast to the belief or
4 keeping the faith, so the concept of calling the reckoning (or religion) a lie is more active than standard English
5 translations such as "unbelief." Those who reject the reckoning — which, in early Meccan revelations, is the
6 foundation of religion — are those who abuse the orphan, who are indifferent to those suffering in their midst, and
7 who are neglectful in performing the prayer. This neglectfulness has been interpreted in two ways by Qur'anic
8 commentators: either as neglecting the proper timing and posture in performing the physical movements or as
9 performing them mechanically while thinking about other things, without following through on the implications
10 of the prayer for other aspects of life and behavior. The second interpretation is supported by the fact that the
11 verse on prayer is followed by two verses on self-display and neglecting the small kindness.

12 Display, particularly of one's own acts of worship or piety, betrays a lack of true generosity. Self-display ends as a
13 form of self-delusion, as a person ignores what the Qur'an announces will be ultimate in the evaluation of each
14 life at the moment of reckoning: a genuine act of kindness, however small it might seem. There is a moral circle
15 of causality implied in the Qur'anic passages on this issue. The refusal to acknowledge the moment of reckoning
16 results in blindness to the small act of kindness. On the other hand, the true weight of that small act will be
17 revealed on the day of reckoning to those who have carried it out and to those who have neglected it alike.

18

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21

THOSE WHO REJECT THE FAITH

22

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

Say: You who reject the faith
I do not worship what you worship
and you do not worship what I worship
I am not a worshipper of what you worship
You are not a worshipper of what I worship
5 A reckoning for you and a reckoning for me

23

24 *Those Who Reject The Faith* contains a series of hymnic repetitions. In arguing against religious intolerance,
25 Muslim scholars frequently point to this Sura as a primary source. The Sura suggests that people worship different
26 things and that the prophet should resign himself to that fact. It does not enjoin any kind of force to compel people

1 to adopt the worship and faith of Islam. The forms of worship mentioned here in a general sense can be taken as
2 differing religions or, ethically, in the sense of whatever one deems of ultimate value (the truth, *al-haqq*).

3 The final verse simply states that there is a *din* for you and a *din* for me. *Din* can mean "religion," "way," or
4 "reckoning." In first two cases, the implication seems to be that diversity of beliefs and values is acknowledged
5 without any call for compulsion or conflict. If *din* is taken as final reckoning, the implication is more specific.
6 There is no need for compulsion in values or beliefs now; each person will receive a just and final reckoning at
7 the proper time.

9 **112**
10 **SINCERITY / UNITY**

11 **In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring**

Version 1

Say he is God, one
God forever
Not begetting, unbegotten,
and having as an equal none

Version 2

Say he is God, one
God the refuge
Not begetting, unbegotten,
and having as an equal none

Version 3

Say he is God, one
God the rock
Not begetting, unbegotten,
and having as an equal none

12
13 The most famous Qur'anic passage of *tawhīd* (affirmation of divine unity) is among the shortest Suras of the
14 Qur'an. In this passage, Allah is affirmed as one, not begetting, not begotten, and as *samad*, an enigmatic term in
15 classical Arabic. *Samad* in pre-Islamic poetry meant a person whom one approached for refuge. Qur'anic
16 commentators have stressed the notion of perdurance and indestructibility. Indeed, there is a feminine form of the
17 word *samada* that means a large rock. In the translations above I have given three versions, each attempting to
18 bring out one aspect of the complex set of meanings this word signifies.

19 Significantly, this short Sura is called by the alternative name of sincerity (*ikhhlās*). In Islamic theology the notion
20 of sincerity or authenticity is necessarily connected with the affirmation of unity. As mentioned earlier, in Islamic
21 theology and mysticism, the affirmation of unity has several facets. It affirms that the deity has no partners or
22 equals. In the moral sense, it has been interpreted as having no other aims, goals, or thoughts beyond the one
23 reality or one deity. In other words, any other object that becomes an end in itself, a goal, is a form of false deity.

1 In the theological sense, it can refer to the interior unity of the deity. To give the deity separate activities (seeing,
2 hearing, knowing, willing) raises issues about the unity of God. If those attributes are eternal, then there are an
3 eternal number of differing powers. If they are not eternal, then God can change, a notion that many Islamic
4 philosophers, influenced by Aristotelian ideas about the impassivity of deity, found inconceivable. Finally, in
5 many mystical theologies, unity involves not knowing or seeing anything but the one deity and — in the view of
6 some mystical philosophers — arrival at a point where one's own existence passes away into the infinite reaches
7 of that one God.